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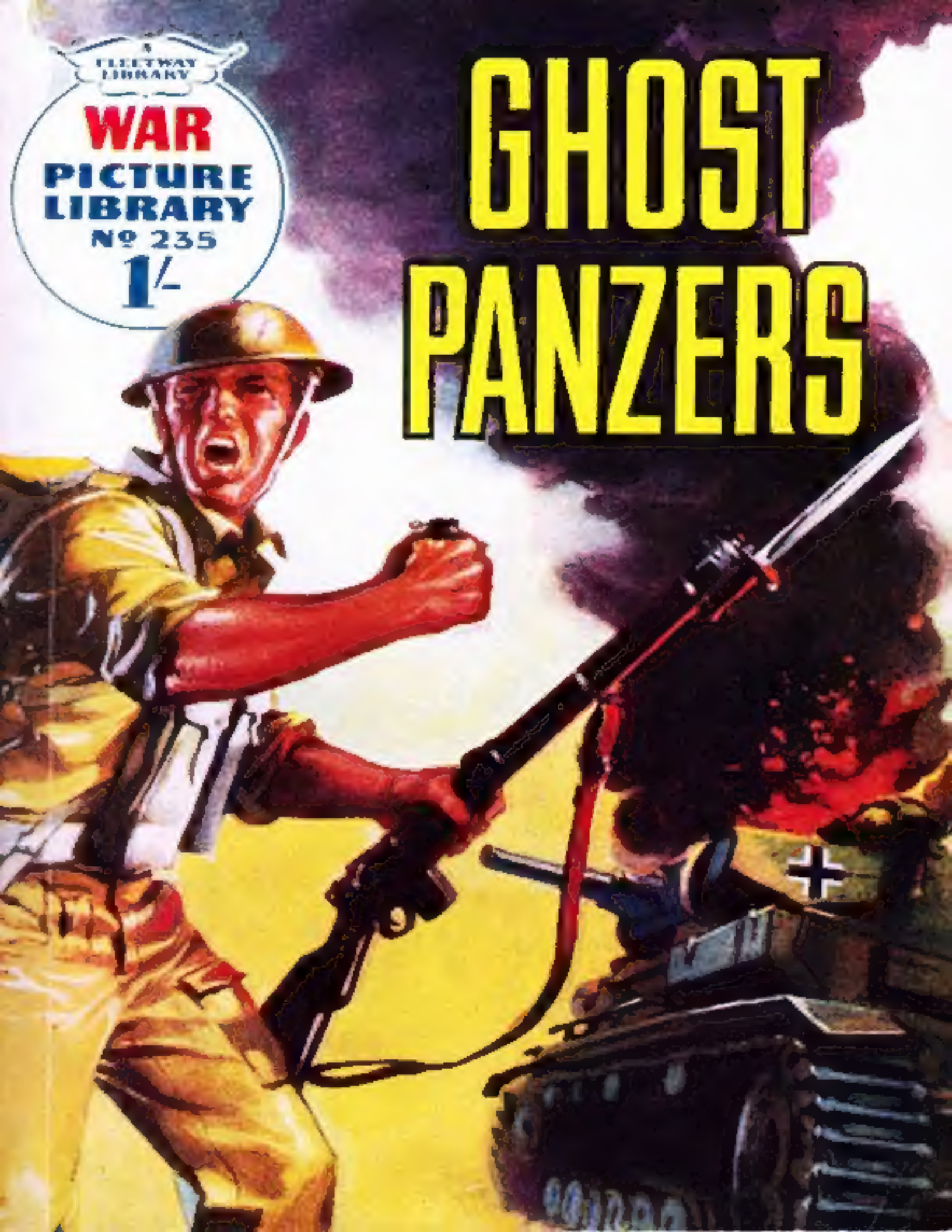

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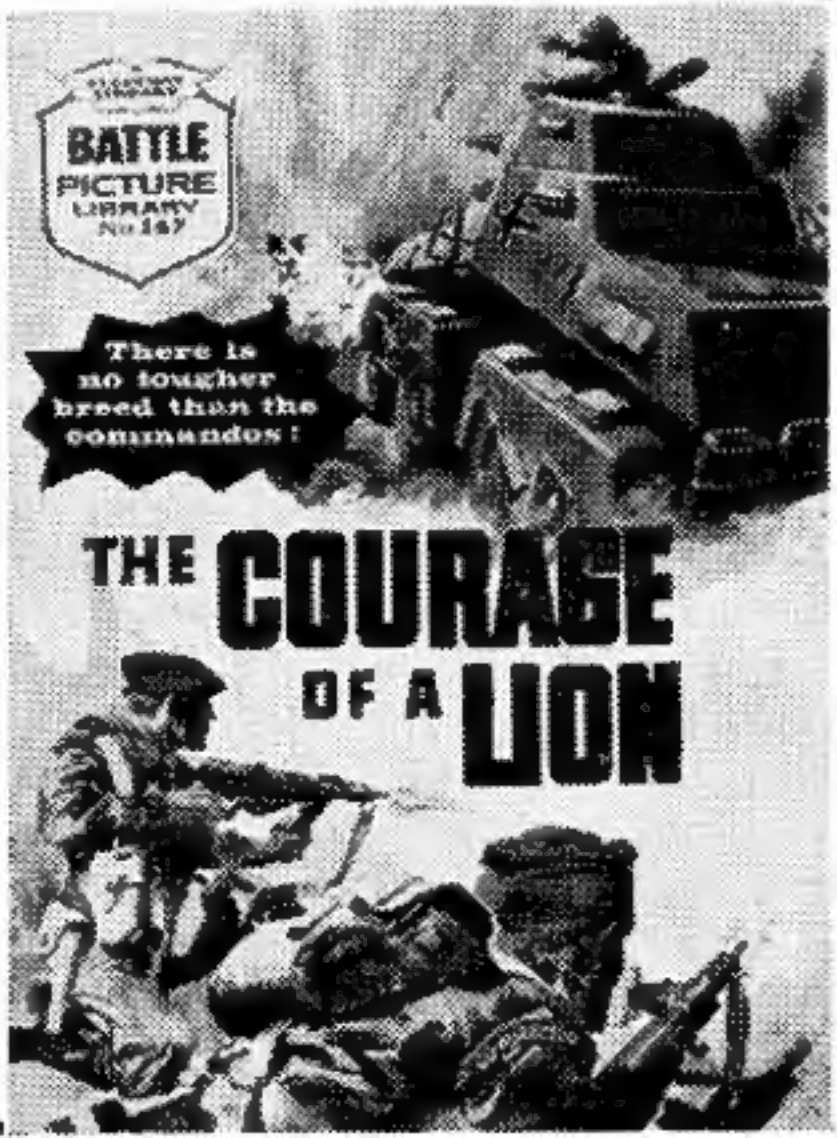

GHOST PANZERS

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Chapter 1. Abandon and Retire

THE WESTERN FRONT, MAY 1940 -- A SCENE OF UTTER CONFUSION AS THE HARD-HITTING PANZERS OF GERMANY PIERCED THE ALLIED LINES IN A SCORE OF PLACES.

OVERWHELMED AND DISORGANISED THE B.E.F. MADE A DISORDERLY RETREAT, LEAVING WHOLE UNITS ISOLATED BEHIND THE ENEMY ADVANCE.

SOME FOUGHT UNTIL THEY WERE WIPED OUT. OTHERS, HOPELESSLY OUTNUMBERED, HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO SURRENDER. BUT THERE WAS A THIRD CHOICE FOR THOSE BOLD ENOUGH TO TAKE IT...

OUR TWO SQUADRONS HAVEN'T A DOG'S CHANCE AGAINST THAT LOT!

WE HAVEN'T IF WE STAY HERE. BUT IF WE MAKE A DASH FOR IT, WE MIGHT BREAK THROUGH!

CAPTAIN STEPHEN HARDCASTLE, COMMANDER OF "B" SQUADRON, SHOOK HIS HEAD.

OUR LAST ORDER BEFORE WE LOST CONTACT WITH H.Q. WAS TO HOLD ON HERE. IT WOULD COST US OUR COMMISSIONS TO PULL OUT NOW.

IT'LL COST US OUR LIVES IF WE DON'T!

THERE WAS A LOOK OF DETERMINATION ON CAPTAIN DICK GRANTLEY'S FACE AS HE CONTINUED.

YOU PLEASE YOURSELF, STEVE. BUT *I'M* NOT MAKING A PRESENT OF MY TANKS TO JERRY. 'C' SQUADRON IS LEAVING!

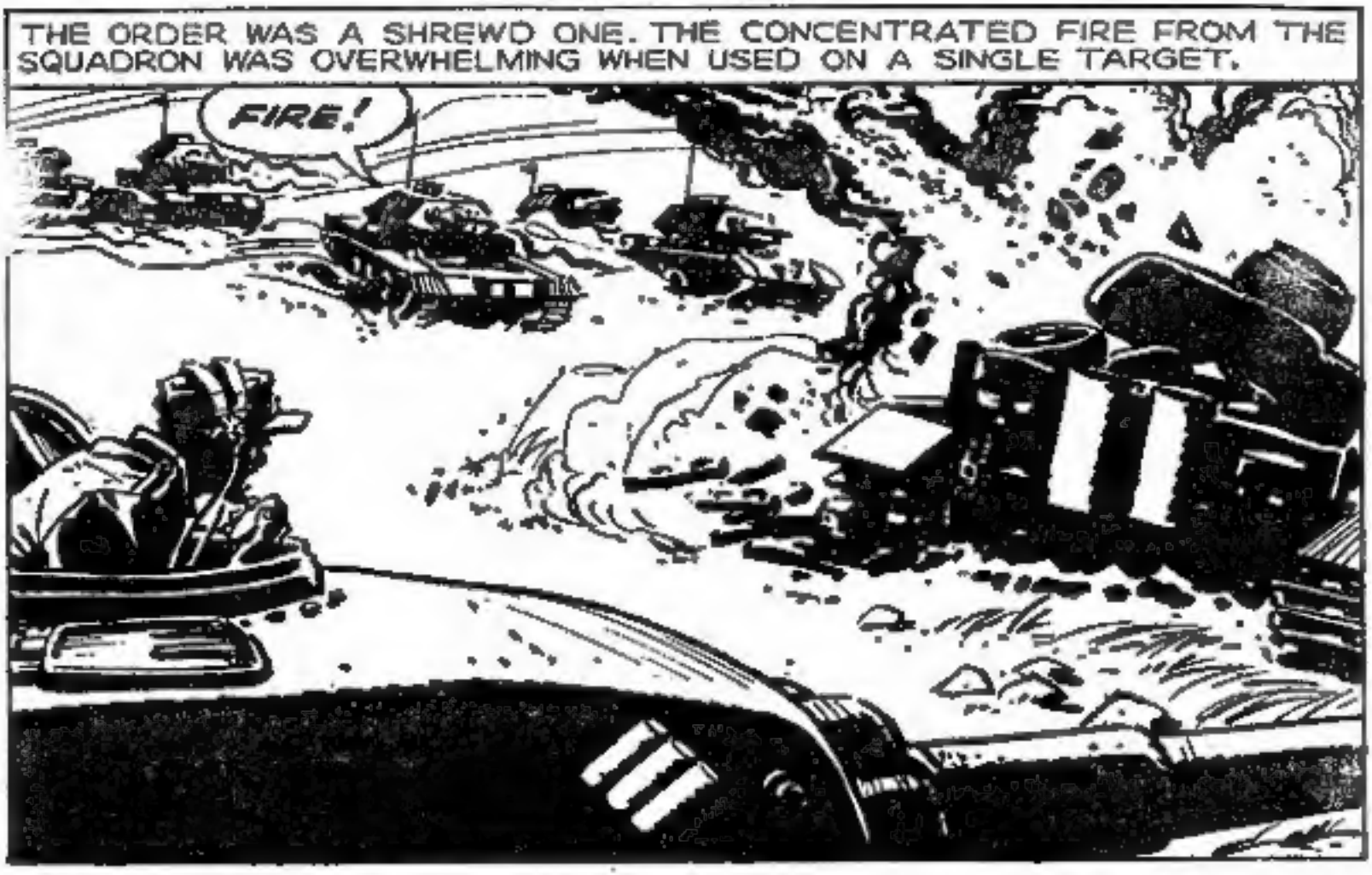
HARDCASTLE STILL TOOK REFUGE IN THE POLICY HE HAD FOLLOWED THROUGHOUT HIS SERVICE LIFE -- OBEY ORDERS TO THE BITTER END!

TWO SQUADRONS STAND A BETTER CHANCE OF BREAKING THROUGH THAN ONE! WHAT ABOUT IT, STEVE?

MY SQUADRON STAYS HERE AS ORDERED!

WHAT'S GOT INTO YOU, STEVE ? DICK IS RIGHT ! WE'LL DO NO GOOD HERE AND ONLY END UP IN THE BAG !
YOU HEARD WHAT I SAID, PAUL -- WE STAY ! DICK GRANTLEY TAKES TOO MANY CHANCES !

THE CRUISERS LURCHED FROM THE COVER OF THE BUILDINGS TOWARDS THE ROAD THE ENEMY WERE USING.
OUR TWO-POUNDER SHELLS WILL BOUNCE OFF THOSE BIG BRUTES, SIR !
NOT IF ALL OUR GUNS CONCENTRATE ON ONE TARGET AT A TIME. PASS THE ORDER, SERGEANT -- I WILL SELECT THE TARGETS !


THE ORDER WAS A SHREWD ONE. THE CONCENTRATED FIRE FROM THE SQUADRON WAS OVERWHELMING WHEN USED ON A SINGLE TARGET.
FIRE!

TAKEN COMPLETELY BY SURPRISE, TWO MORE PANZERS SUFFERED THE FATE OF THE FIRST, ONE OF THEM THE GERMAN COMMAND TANK.
ALL GUNS TRAVERSE RIGHT ~~ FIRE!

BEREFT OF THEIR LEADER, THE GERMAN COLUMN WAS THROWN INTO CHAOS. ONLY A FEW WILD SHOTS FOLLOWED "C" SQUADRON AS THE CRUISERS CRASHED THROUGH THE PANZER LINES TO FREEDOM.

THEY'RE NOT COMING AFTER US, SIR! LOOKS LIKE WE'VE MADE IT!

WE MUST HAVE KNOCKED OUT THEIR LEADER--THE HUNS WON'T ACT WITHOUT ORDERS!

AND THEY'RE NOT THE ONLY ONES!

EVEN AS STEVE HARDCASTLE SAW "C" SQUADRON BREAK THROUGH THE IRON RING AROUND THE TOWN, THE SIGNAL HE HAD BEEN AWAITING CAME THROUGH.

MESSAGE FROM BRIGADE, SIR! "B" AND "C" SQUADRONS TO ABANDON TOWN AND RETIRE SOUTH-WEST IMMEDIATELY!

NOW, PERHAPS, WE CAN GET TO HECK OUT OF THIS TRAP AT LAST!

HARDCASTLE GAVE THE ORDER WHICH HE SHOULD HAVE GIVEN TWENTY MINUTES EARLIER.

SQUADRON ADVANCE!

AND ABOUT BLOOMIN' TIME, TOO, MATE!

BUT "B" SQUADRON HAD WAITED TOO LONG AND THE ENEMY, SMARTING FROM THEIR LOSSES, HAD REORGANISED THE BRITISH TANKS RAN INTO TROUBLE...
MUSTARD FIVE TO MUSTARD LEADER-- MAYDAY! MAYDAY!
CANNOT HELP YOU, NUMBER FIVE. SET FIRE TO YOUR TANK AND BALE OUT!

THREE MILES AWAY, DICK GRANTLEY HEARD THE SOUNDS OF BATTLE AND THAT FRANTIC EXCHANGE OF SIGNALS.
PEPPERPOT LEADER TO ALL TANKS--TURN ABOUT! 'B' SQUADRON'S IN TROUBLE!

THE LAST THING THE GERMANS EXPECTED WAS FOR GRANTLEY'S SQUADRON TO RETURN AND STRIKE THEM FROM THE REAR.
HIMMEL! THE OTHER ENGLANDER PANZERS ARE BACK AGAIN!

THE ATTACK RELIEVED THE PRESSURE AND, WITH ENGINES RACING AT FULL THROTTLE, THE SURVIVING TANKS OF 'B' SQUADRON BROKE THROUGH THE PANZER LINE.
THIS WAY, STEVE. COME ON, CHUM!

FASTER THAN THEIR MORE HEAVILY ARMOURED OPPONENTS, THE BRITISH CRUISER TANKS RACED FROM THE SCENE.
WELL, THANKS TO 'C' SQUADRON WE MADE IT AFTER ALL-- AT LEAST, SOME OF US DID!
OH, SHUT UP! IT'S EASY TO BE WISE AFTER THE EVENT. AT LEAST I HAD ORDERS TO LEAVE!

TWO DAYS LATER, THEY FINALLY MADE CONTACT WITH THE RETREATING BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.
GLAD TO SEE YOU BACK, GRANTLEY-- AND WITH YOUR SQUADRON INTACT, TOO! YOU'RE JUST IN TIME TO TAKE OVER MAJOR RUSKIN'S JOB. HE STOPPED A PACKET YESTERDAY!
THANK YOU, SIR!
I'M MAKING YOU UP TO ACTING MAJOR, GRANTLEY. YOU'LL HAND OVER YOUR SQUADRON TO HARDCASTLE NOW THAT YOU'RE MY SECOND-IN-COMMAND.
VERY GOOD, SIR!

Chapter 2. Burden of Guilt

FROM THAT DAY ON, HARDCASTLE NURSED A SENSE OF GRIEVANCE. BUT HE WAS CAREFUL NOT TO SHOW HIS FEELINGS TO THE MAN WHO WAS NOW HIS IMMEDIATE SUPERIOR ...

ACT AS REARGUARD, STEVE. WHEN THE OTHERS ARE EMBARKED, YOU'LL BLOW UP YOUR TANKS AND JOIN US ON FOOT. WHATEVER HAPPENS, JERRY MUSTN'T GET ANY OF OUR TANKS INTACT. OKAY ?

ANYTHING YOU SAY!

THERE WAS A CALCULATING LOOK IN HARDCASTLE'S EYES AS THE OTHER DROVE OFF

IF I COULD GET MY TANKS AWAY INTACT WITHOUT BLOWING THEM UP IT WOULD BE A FEATHER IN MY CAP. THERE ARE SOME MORE LCTs FARTHER DOWN THE BEACH -- THEY COULD TAKE US OFF!

AND WHY NOT? WHAT RIGHT HAS HE TO EXPECT ME TO OBEY HIS ORDERS, ANYWAY? HE DISOBEYS ORDERS HIMSELF WHEN IT SUITS HIM... AND GETS PROMOTED FOR IT.

NEVER BEFORE IN HIS WHOLE ARMY LIFE HAD STEVE HARDCASTLE QUERIED AN ORDER. NEVER HAD HE TAKEN A CHANCE, BACKING HIS OWN INITIATIVE TO JUSTIFY DISOBEDIENCE.

BUT, PERHAPS BECAUSE HE LACKED THE JUDGMENT FROM WHICH INITIATIVE IS CREATED, HE CHOSE HIS MOMENT BADLY.

STRIKE ME UP A GUM TREE! THAT ONE WAS TOO CLOSE TO BE 'EALTHY! WOT'S OUR REARGUARD UP TO? IT'S THEIR JOB TO STOP THIS SORT OF LARK!

MY STARS! HARDCASTLE HAS PULLED HIS MOB OUT!

LEFT WITHOUT PROTECTION, GRANTLEY HAD TO SACRIFICE SOME OF HIS TANKS TO SAVE THOSE WHICH HAD ALREADY EMBARKED.

THE DARNED IDIOT! HE WOULD CHOOSE THIS MOMENT TO GET THE BIT BETWEEN HIS TEETH. THIS COULD COST US EVERY TANK IN THE UNIT!

HARDCASTLE'S MOMENT OF ELATION WAS ALREADY PASSING. THE ENORMITY OF WHAT HE HAD DONE WAS BEGINNING TO DAWN ON HIM.

OH NO! WHAT HAVE I DONE?

HE STARED AGHAST! EACH OF THOSE TANK LANDING CRAFT WAS A WATERLOGGED AND ABANDONED WRECK! HIS CRUISERS WERE DOOMED!

MEANWHILE, GRANTLEY'S PROMPT ACTION HAD FORCED THE ENEMY BACK OUT OF RANGE, GIVING HIM TIME TO SIZE UP HARDCASTLE'S PREDICAMENT.

WELL, THERE GO SOME OF THEM, BUT WE'RE LEFT HIGH AND DRY, I'M AFRAID. FOLLOW ME! WE'VE GOT TO HELP CAPTAIN HARDCASTLE NOW.

ENGROSSED IN THEIR TASK OF DESTRUCTION, THE GERMAN GUNNERS FAILED TO NOTICE THE APPROACH OF GRANTLEY'S AVENGING CRUISERS
SET FIRE TO YOUR TANKS, THEN BALE OUT AND SURRENDER.
HOLD IT, SKIPPER -- THE MAJOR'S ON HIS WAY TO HELP US!
BUT IT WAS TOO LATE! THE CREWS HAD ALREADY OBEYED THE ORDER EVEN AS DICK GRANTLEY'S TANKS SWEPT THE ENEMY GUNNERS AND THEIR WEAPONS INTO OBLIVION.
WHAT A SHAMBLES! I'M GLAD I DON'T HAVE TO CARRY THE CAN FOR THIS LOT!

GRANTLEY CLIMBED STIFFLY DOWN TO THE SAND. LESS THAN HALF THE UNIT HAD ESCAPED THE REST WERE ALREADY WRECKED OR DOOMED.
I TRIED TO SAVE THE TANKS, DICK. I DIDN'T REALISE ...
SAVE IT UNTIL LATER. MEANWHILE, GET THE REMAINING TANKS DUG IN. WHILE THE AMMO LASTS WE CAN MAKE A NUISANCE OF OURSELVES.

FOR ANOTHER DAY THEY DID JUST THAT AND UNDER THEIR PROTECTION, THAT PART OF THE BEACH BECAME A RALLYING POINT FOR PARTIES OF WEARY MEN AWAITING RESCUE.
DEMOLITION CHARGES SET IN EVERY TANK, SIR.
GOOD! AS EACH RUNS OUT OF AMMO, SHE'S TO BE BLOWN UP. THEN THE CREWS CAN TAKE THEIR CHANCE ON THE BEACH WITH THE INFANTRY.

GRANTLEY STAYED UNTIL THE LAST TANK ERUPTED UNDER THE VERY NOSES OF THE ADVANCING GERMANS

COME ON, SIR! NOTHING TO STAY FOR NOW!

NO, I SUPPOSE NOT. NOTHING AT ALL!

THE AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND WERE DISMAYED BY THE HEAVY LOSS OF EQUIPMENT.

MAJOR GRANTLEY, YOU WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR FOUR SQUADRONS OF CRUISERS. OVER SEVENTY PER CENT OF THEM WERE LOST. YOU WILL BE TRANSFERRED TO LESS RESPONSIBLE DUTIES. THAT IS ALL!

STEPHEN HARDCASTLE STROVE TO HIDE THE RELIEF AND TRIUMPH HE FELT.

BAD LUCK, DICK. I COULD HAVE CLEARED YOU IN A SHOT IF THEY'D GIVEN ME A CHANCE TO EXPLAIN.

IT DOESN'T MATTER. I EXPECT I'LL GET OVER IT. THIS WILL MEAN A LEG UP FOR YOU, THOUGH!

NEVER AGAIN WOULD HARDCASTLE ACT OUTSIDE THE SCOPE OF HIS ORDERS . . .
GRANTLEY'S LEAVING US, HARDCASTLE, SO I AM PROMOTING YOU TO MAJOR IN HIS PLACE. JUST STICK TO THE BOOK AND REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED TO DICK GRANTLEY.
I WILL, SIR.

NEXT DAY, DICK GRANTLEY LEFT, POSTED TO A TRANSPORT UNIT WHERE THE CHANCES OF REALLY ACTIVE SERVICE APPEARED VERY REMOTE.
TRANSPORT 'EADQUARTERS, SIR? 'OP UP -- I'LL TAKE YOU THERE WHEN I'VE FINISHED DELIVERING THIS SWILL TO THE LOCAL FARMERS.
ON SECOND THOUGHTS, I'LL WALK! YOU CAN TAKE MY LUGGAGE!

AT TRANSPORT HEADQUARTERS, HIS FEARS WERE CONFIRMED ...
HELLO, SIR! WELCOME TO OUR REST CAMP! THE QUIETEST AND SAFEST CRIB IN THE WHOLE WAR. I'M PERCY SANDERS, YOUR SECOND IN COMMAND.
WELL, MISTER SANDERS, WE'LL HAVE TO SMARTEN THIS PLACE UP A BIT, I THINK!

DICK GRANTLEY DID HIS BEST AND AS THE MONTHS WENT BY, THE UNIT SLOWLY GREW MORE EFFICIENT.
SIGNAL FROM HOME COMMAND, SIR! THE UNIT IS TO PREPARE FOR POSTING TO THE MIDDLE EAST. DOES THAT MEAN WE'LL BE IN THE FIGHTING, SIR?
THAT WOULD BE TOO MUCH TO HOPE FOR, SANDERS.

IN NORTH AFRICA, TWO YEARS LATER, A BRONZED MAJOR SAT LISTENING TO THE DISTANT SOUNDS OF BATTLE WHICH RUMBLED LIKE SUMMER THUNDER ON THE HOT, STILL AIR.

TWO YEARS OF UTTER BOREDOM, FERRYING TINS OF BULLY BEEF AND PETROL OVER ENDLESS MILES OF SAND. ALL BECAUSE -- OH, WHAT'S THE USE? I BET HARDCASTLE'S DONE ALL RIGHT FOR HIMSELF, THOUGH.

THE MAJOR LOOKS PROPER CHEESED OFF, DON'T HE, CORP? I HEARD TELL HE USED TO BE A TANK OFFICER UNTIL HE LOST FOUR SQUADRONS AT DUNKIRK. MUST BE A RIGHT CHARLIE TO DO A THING LIKE THAT!

BELT UP, SNOWY -- THE MAJOR'S A GOOD OFFICER. HE WAS JUST LEFT CARRYING THE CAN, THAT'S ALL.

IF THOSE YEARS HAD BEEN ONES OF FRUSTRATION FOR DICK GRANTLEY, THEY HAD BEEN YEARS OF OPPORTUNITY AND SWIFT PROMOTION FOR BRIGADIER STEPHEN HARDCASTLE.

THERE'S EL SHIRREF AND YOUR NEW H.Q., STEVE. HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE TAKING COMMAND OF A BRIGADE?

A BRIGADE IS ONLY A START. BEFORE I'M THROUGH I'LL RISE HIGHER STILL, YOU MARK MY WORDS!

THE STAFF CAR DROVE THROUGH THE TRANSPORT LINES AND AS GRANTLEY SAW THE FLUTTERING PENNANT, HE AUTOMATICALLY SALUTED. THEN HE STARED AS IF HE COULD HARDLY BELIEVE HIS EYES...
MUST BE OUR NEW BRIGADIER AND HIS CHIEF OF STAFF. BY GLORY, THEY LOOK LIKE STEVE HARDCASTLE AND YOUNG PAUL WHITEWAY. IT CAN'T BE...
WHAT'S THE MATTER, SIR? YOU LOOK AS IF YOU'VE SEEN A GHOST!
MAYBE I HAVE -- OR ELSE I'M SLOWLY GOING ROUND THE BEND LOOK AT THOSE LUCKY BLIGHTERS -- THEY'RE GOING OUT TO DO A REAL JOB!

THEN, EVEN AS GRANTLEY WATCHED WITH GROWING ENVY, THE OFFICER COMMANDING THE TANKS SUDDENLY SWAYED AND FELL.
HELLO! WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH THAT CHAP?
MAYBE HE'S GOT A TOUCH OF THE SUN! COME ON!

IT'S CAPTAIN LARKIN, SIR -- OUR SQUADRON COMMANDER. WE'RE GOING AFTER SOME JERRY TRANSPORT AND WERE ONLY WAITING FOR HIM TO GIVE THE ORDER TO MOVE OFF.
YOU'LL WAIT A LONG TIME THEN, SERGEANT -- HE'S GOT SUNSTROKE! HERE, SANDERS, YOU LOOK AFTER HIM -- I'LL TAKE HIS PLACE.

GRANTLEY SWUNG HIMSELF UP INTO THE TURRET OF THE CAPTAIN'S TANK AND THE HOT OILY SMELL BROUGHT OLD MEMORIES FLOODING BACK.
BUT, SIR, YOU CAN'T DO THAT! YOU AREN'T A TANK OFFICER...
THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE WRONG, LADDIE. DRIVER -- ADVANCE!

THE SECOND-IN-COMMAND OF THE SQUADRON LOOKED DUBIOUSLY AT GRANTLEY. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT THIS STRANGE TRANSPORT MAJOR'S MANNER WHICH MADE HIM HESITATE TO RAISE AN OBJECTION.

YOU'LL BE THE SECOND-IN-COMMAND? RIGHT! WHAT'S OUR TARGET AND OUR CALL SIGN?

ER--TARGET IS AN ENEMY M.T. COLUMN, SIR...STEERING SOUTH WEST. OUR CALL SIGN IS NELSON, SIR.

DICK GRANTLEY GAVE A CRISP ORDER INTO HIS MICROPHONE AND THE TANKS WHEELED OBEDIENTLY INTO LINE.

NELSON, EH? AND VERY APT, TOO! HE WAS ANOTHER ONE FOR DISOBEYING ORDERS. THE ONLY DIFFERENCE WAS THAT HE GOT AWAY WITH IT, AND I DIDN'T! WELL, HERE GOES...

IT DID NOT TAKE LONG FOR NEWS OF THE EXPLOIT TO REACH BRIGADE H.Q.

SORRY TO INTERRUPT, SIR, BUT-- BUT SOME STRANGE OFFICER HAS TAKEN COMMAND OF NINE-ONE-SIX SQUADRON WITHOUT PERMISSION. ORDERS TO RETURN ARE BEING IGNORED.

WHAT'S THIS? SEND A SCOUT CAR TO BRING THE FELLER BACK AT ONCE. PUT HIM UNDER CLOSE ARREST.

MEANWHILE, WITH THE MASSIVE STEEL HULL LURCHING AND THROBBING BENEATH HIM, DICK GRANTLEY WAS IN HIS ELEMENT.

THINK YOUR INTERCEPTION COURSE IS ADRIFT, SIR. THERE'S NOTHING AHEAD OF US IN THIS DIRECTION.

THERE WILL BE! THEY'LL HAVE SEEN OUR DUST AND BE LYING DOGGO BEHIND THOSE SANDHILLS. TAKE HALF THE SQUADRON AND CIRCLE IN FROM THE RIGHT -- AND WE'LL HAVE 'EM COLD!

ALTHOUGH CONVINCED THAT THE OLDER MAN WAS MISTAKEN, THE LIEUTENANT OBEYED THE ORDER.

IF WE'VE MISSED THEM THERE'LL BE AN ALMIGHTY ROW WHEN WE GET BACK. I SHOULDN'T HAVE LET HIM TAKE COMMAND...

BUT, GRANTLEY'S EXPERIENCE AS A TRANSPORT COMMANDER AS WELL AS A TANK OFFICER, TOLD HIM EXACTLY HOW THE ENEMY SUPPLY COLUMN WOULD BEHAVE. A MINUTE LATER...
STONE THE CROWS, HE WAS RIGHT! ALL TANKS, OPEN FIRE!

DICK GRANTLEY'S ELATION WAS TINGED WITH PITY AS THE LUMBERING TARGETS JERKED INTO MOVEMENT, SCATTERING IN A HOPELESS ATTEMPT TO EVADE DESTRUCTION.
THAT CAN BE MY FATE SOME DAY, IF I'M NOT CASHIERED FOR THIS LITTLE JAUNT!

THE ARMOURED JAWS OF THE PINCERS CLOSED, AND THE GERMAN COMMANDER DID THE ONLY POSSIBLE THING. THEN THE SCOUT CAR FROM BASE ARRIVED ON THE SCENE.

THE STAFF OFFICER RACED BACK AHEAD OF THE RETURNING COLUMN.
IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES, I HOPE I DID RIGHT IN NOT PLACING HIM UNDER ARREST, SIR? HIS NAME IS GRANTLEY, BY THE WAY -- MAJOR RICHARD GRANTLEY!
DICK GRANTLEY! YES, YOU DID QUITE RIGHT. TELL HIM I'D LIKE TO SEE HIM.
THE BRIGADIER SMILED WITH SATISFACTION. SO DICK GRANTLEY WAS STILL ONLY A MAJOR.

STEPHEN HARDCASTLE WAS ON TOP OF HIS WORLD AND GREETED DICK AMIABLY.
DICK, MY DEAR CHAP, SIT DOWN. STILL TAKING CHANCES, I SEE. WELL, THIS ONE CAME OFF VERY NICELY, SO WE'LL SAY NO MORE ABOUT IT, EH? YOU'LL GET A "MENTION" FOR THIS.

I'D SOONER HAVE A TRANSFER BACK TO TANKS, STEVE -- I MEAN, SIR. M.T. WORK ISN'T MY LINE OF COUNTRY.
I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THAT. HAVE TO SPEAK TO DIV. H.Q. AND THAT MEANS RAKING UP YOUR OLD RECORD, WHAT? IN THE MEANTIME, NO MORE FREELANCING, EH? BAD FOR DISCIPLINE AND ALL THAT!

ON HIS WAY BACK TO THE TRANSPORT LINES, DICK'S BROW WAS CLOUDED.
HE'LL NEVER TAKE UP MY REQUEST WITH DIVISIONAL H.Q. HIS OWN RECORD IS TIED IN WITH MINE AND NOW HE'S HIT THE JACKPOT, HE WON'T WANT THAT RAKED UP!

THE SAME THOUGHT HAD OCCURRED TO HARDCASTLE HIMSELF.
WHAT ABOUT OLD DICK'S APPLICATION TO GO BACK TO TANKS, STEVE? SHALL I GET DIV. ON THE BLOWER AFTER LUNCH?
NO! WOULDN'T DO HIM ANY GOOD -- ONLY DIG UP OLD MISUNDERSTANDINGS. I'LL PUT HIM IN FOR A D.S.O., INSTEAD. THAT'LL KEEP HIM HAPPY!

AS THE DAYS PASSED, GRANTLEY BECAME ALMOST RECONCILED TO THE IDEA THAT HIS FIGHTING DAYS WERE OVER.

HERE WE GO AGAIN! THIS IS THE SIXTH SUPPLY RUN SINCE I ASKED TO GO BACK INTO TANKS. I'LL ASK STEVE ONCE MORE WHEN WE GET BACK FROM THIS TRIP -- NOT THAT IT WILL DO THE FOGGIEST BIT OF GOOD!

BUT GRANTLEY COULD NOT KNOW THAT EVEN THEN EVENTS WERE ALREADY SHAPING WHICH WOULD GIVE HIM ALL THE ACTION HE CRAVED.

COLUMN "X" WILL PIERCE THE BRITISH LINE HERE, THEN HIDE IN THIS WADI OUTSIDE EL SHIRREF UNTIL THE MOMENT IS RIPE TO TAKE THE TOWN.

JA, HERR GENERAL! THE FUEHRER WILL BE PLEASED IF WE SMASH THIS BRITISH ARMOURED BRIGADE AND CAPTURE ITS NEW COMMANDER!

WITHIN HOURS, THE ATTACK WAS ON AND THE PANZERS COLUMN "X" WERE THROUGH.
SHEEPDOG SEVEN TO SHEEPDOG BASE... ENEMY BREAKTHROUGH, REPEAT BREAKTHROUGH. PANZER RAIDING FORCE HEADING NORTH...

WHEN GRANTLEY'S CONVOY REACHED THE FORWARD POSITION, NEWS OF THAT BREAKTHROUGH HAD JUST COME IN...
I WISH I COULD GIVE YOU AN ESCORT FOR YOUR RETURN TRIP, OLD BOY, BUT I DAREN'T SPARE THE TANKS. UNTIL JERRY'S LOCATED, NOBODY WILL BE SAFE IN THE BACK AREAS.
DON'T WORRY. I GUESS WE CAN LOOK AFTER OURSELVES.

BUT ON THE WAY BACK HE HAD MISGIVINGS. THE MEMORY OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THAT GERMAN COLUMN A FEW DAYS AGO KEPT FLOODING BACK.
NOT FAR TO GO NOW, S'R, AND NO SIGN OF JERRY. SHAN'T BE SORRY TO GET BACK. THIS SORT OF LARK IS TOO DODGY FOR MY LIKING.
RIGHT NOW, I COULDN'T AGREE MORE, SANDERS.

GRANTLEY'S BATTLE-WISE EYES HAD NOT MISSED THE TELL-TALE TRACKS WHICH LED INTO THE WADI, BUT HE KEPT WHAT HE HAD SEEN TO HIMSELF.
THAT WADI IS A DEAD-END, AND THE TRACKS GO IN BUT DON'T COME OUT AGAIN! THAT HUN FLYING COLUMN HAS GONE TO EARTH THERE, I BET!

WITHIN THE WADI, HOSTILE EYES WATCHED THE CONVOY AS IT RUMBLED PAST, APPARENTLY UNAWARE OF THE PERIL WHICH LURKED SO NEAR.
SHALL WE OPEN FIRE AND DESTROY THEM, HERR GENERAL?
NEIN, THEY HAVEN'T SEEN US OR THEY WOULD BE SCATTERING BY NOW. IF WE OPEN FIRE IT WILL BE HEARD IN EL SHIRREF AND OUR SECRET WILL BE OUT. LET THEM GO.
GRANTLEY BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF AS THE DANGER RECEDED AND THE TURRETS OF THE OLD FORT CAME INTO SIGHT.
NOT A SIGN OF ANY JERRIES. IF YOU ASK ME, OUR CHAPS AT THE FRONT FLAP TOO MUCH, SIR.
YOU WANT TO THANK YOUR LUCKY STARS YOU'RE STILL ALIVE, SANDERS. WE PASSED WITHIN HALF A MILE OF THOSE PANZERS AN HOUR AGO.

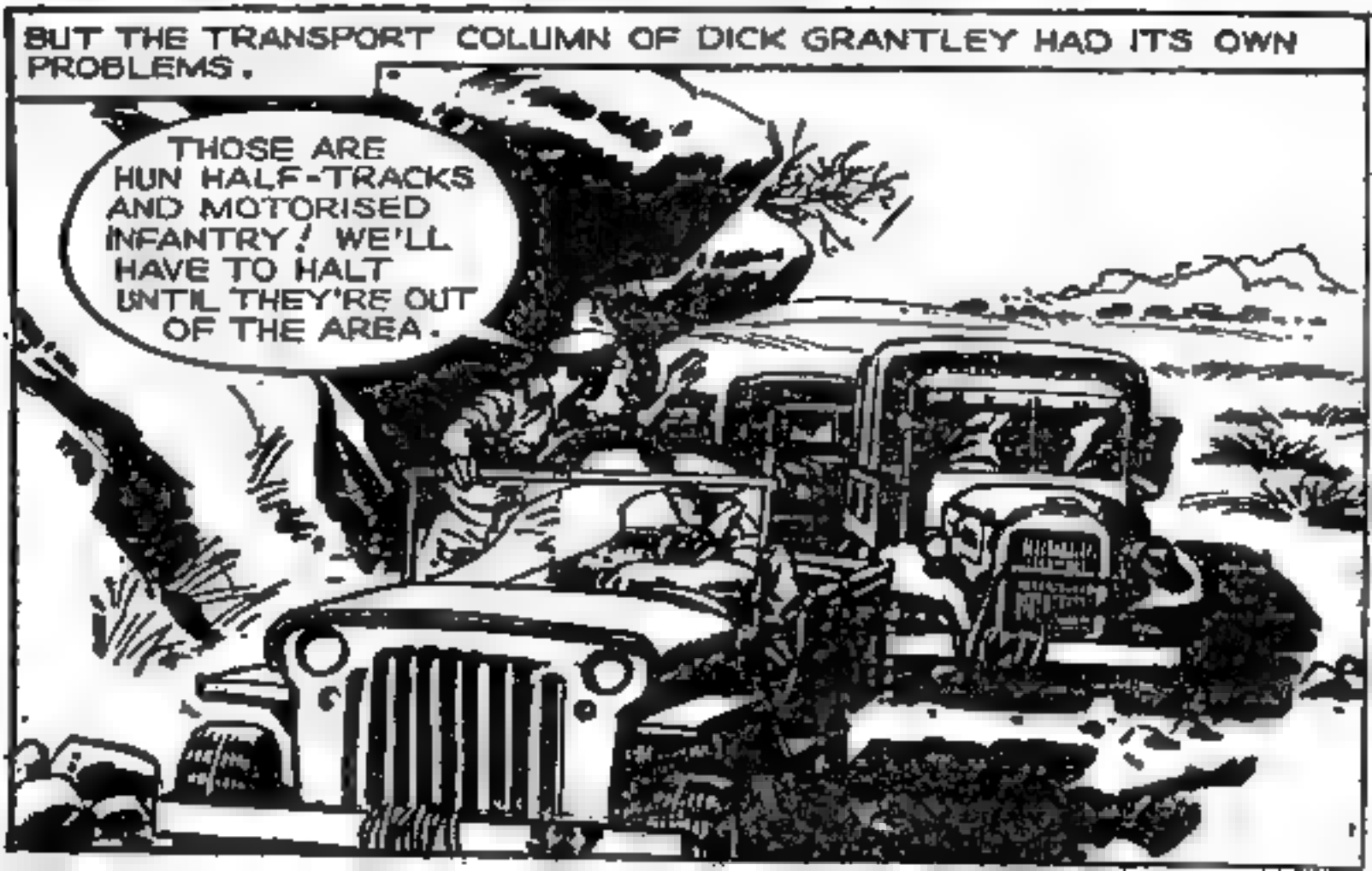
BUT, IF GRANTLEY HAD EXPECTED THE BRIGADIER TO TAKE ANY POSITIVE ACTION WHEN HE MADE HIS REPORT, HE WAS DISAPPOINTED.
THEY'RE IN THAT WADI, ALL RIGHT! IF YOU'LL LEND ME A SQUADRON OF TANKS, STEVE, I COULD CLOBBER THAT LITTLE LOT.
YOU'RE IMAGINING THINGS, OLD BOY! THERE AREN'T ANY HUNS WITHIN FIFTY MILES OF HERE. IF ANY PANZERS HAVE BROKEN THROUGH THEY'LL BE NEAR THE FRONT LINE, NOT RIGHT HERE ON OUR DOORSTEP!

BUT, LOOK HERE, STEVE, I TELL YOU I SAW THEIR TRACKS!
PLENTY OF TRACKS ON THE DESERT, OLD CHAP. NOW TROT ALONG AND GET YOUR NEXT CONVOY LOADED UP. FORGET THIS NONSENSE ABOUT LEADING TANKS INTO BATTLE... AND THAT'S AN ORDER, DICK!

WHITE WITH ANGER, GRANTLEY UNBURDENED HIMSELF TO PAUL WHITEWAY.
THE CLOT STILL THINKS HE'S PLAYING SAFE. JERRY WILL CATCH HIM UNAWARES UNLESS I TAKE THOSE TANKS AND CLOBBER THEM FIRST. I'LL DO IT, TOO, EVEN IF I'M CASHIERED FOR IT!
TAKE IT EASY, DICK! HE'LL BE DOWN ON YOU LIKE A TON OF BRICKS IF YOU GO AGAINST HIM. TAKE MY TIP AND FORGET IT!

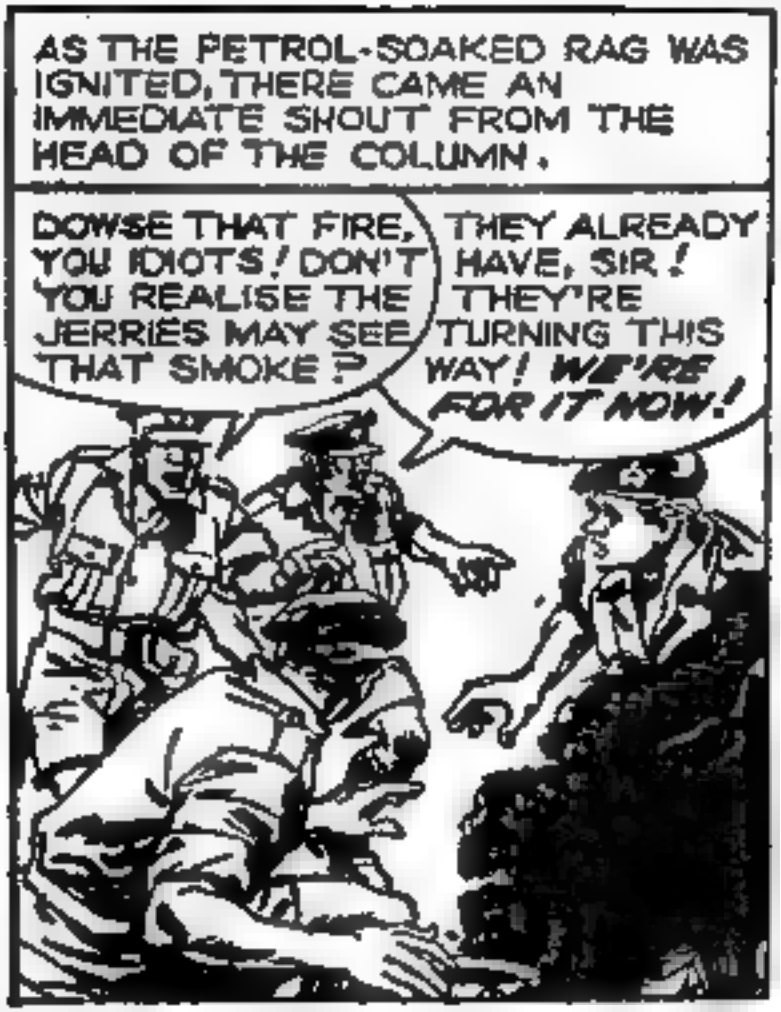
Chapter 3. Danger Column

ALL ALONG THE FRONT THE FIGHTING HAD FLARED UP.
DOWN TO FIFTY ROUNDS! TH.S IS CRAZY! IT'S ABOUT TIME OUR SUPPLY TRAIN SHOWED UP.


BUT THE TRANSPORT COLUMN OF DICK GRANTLEY HAD ITS OWN PROBLEMS.
THOSE ARE HUN HALF-TRACKS AND MOTORISED INFANTRY! WE'LL HAVE TO HALT UNTIL THEY'RE OUT OF THE AREA.

THE FULL DANGERS OF THEIR SITUATION HAD NOT IMPRESSED ITSELF ON EVERY CREW, HOWEVER.
COR, I COULDN'T HALF USE A CUPPA RIGHT NOW, BUT THE MAJOR WOULD DO HIS NUT IF HE SAW US HAVE A BREW-UP!
HE WON'T SEE US IF WE NIP ROUND THE BACK OF THE TRUCK, MATE. COME ON!

NEWLY OUT FROM ENGLAND, THE TWO YOUNG DRIVERS NEVER DREAMED THAT THEIR ACTION WAS TANTAMOUNT TO SUICIDE.
OKAY, SNOWY. LIGHT UP AND LET'S HAVE THAT CHAR!

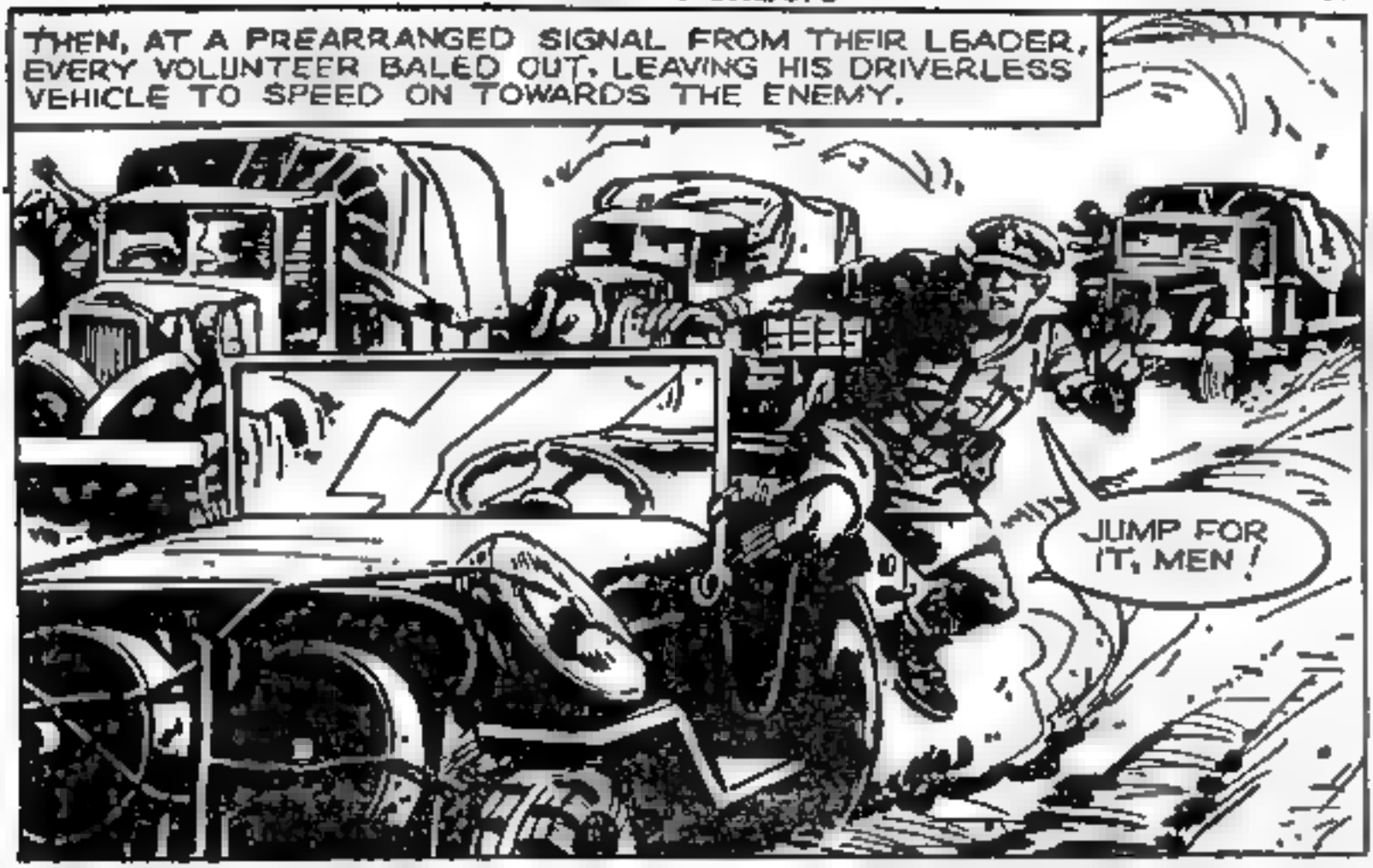

AS THE PETROL-SOAKED RAG WAS IGNITED, THERE CAME AN IMMEDIATE SHOUT FROM THE HEAD OF THE COLUMN.
DOWSE THAT FIRE, YOU IDIOTS! DON'T YOU REALISE THE JERRIES MAY SEE THAT SMOKE?
THEY ALREADY HAVE, SIR! THEY'RE TURNING THIS WAY! WE'RE FOR IT NOW!

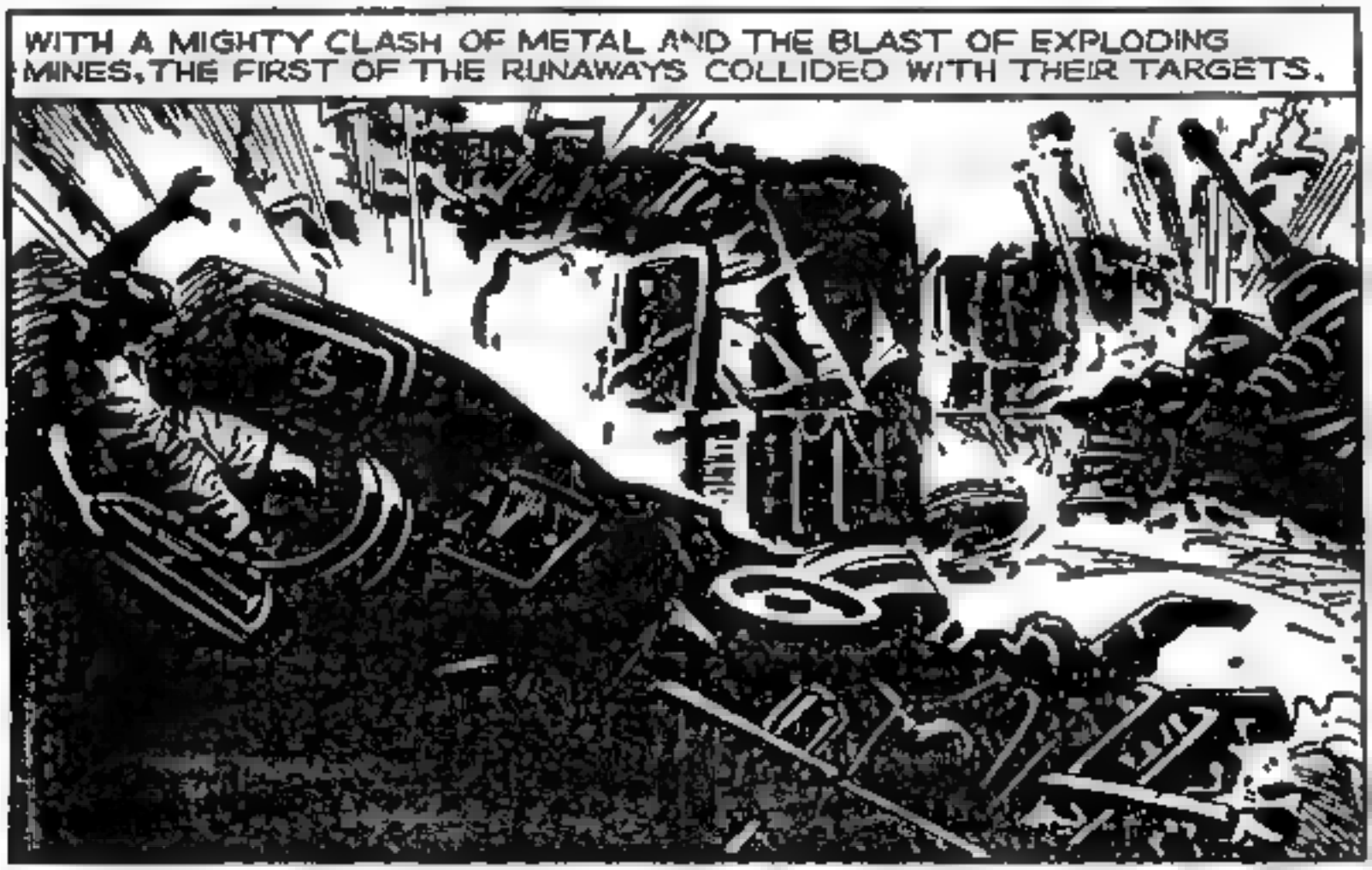
WHAT NOW, SIR? IT'S NO GOOD RUNNING FOR IT...
AND IF WE STAY HERE WE'RE SITTING DUCKS! QUICK, GET THOSE LAND MINES FROM NUMBER EIGHT TRUCK.

AS THE MINES WERE DISTRIBUTED, THE MAJOR EXPLAINED.
LISTEN, MEN! I WANT A VOLUNTEER DRIVER FOR EACH TRUCK, KEEPING THREE TRUCKS BACK FOR THE REST TO ESCAPE IN. THEN WE'RE GOING TO CHARGE THOSE HUNS AND WITH LUCK WE'LL BLOW SOME OF 'EM UP!
STONE THE CROWS— WHAT A 'OPE!

AS IF TO ADD FORCE TO DICK GRANTLEY'S PLAN, THE GERMANS OPENED FIRE AS THEY CAME IN RANGE. WITH A DEAFENING ROAR A TANKER EXPLODED...
COUNT ME IN, SIR! I'LL 'AVE A SMACK AT THEM SQUAREHEADS!
ME TOO, SIR! THERE AIN'T NO FUTURE IN THIS AUNT SALLY LARK!

A FEW MOMENTS LATER, THE GERMANS STARED IN DISBELIEF AS GRANTLEY'S MECHANICAL CAVALRY THUNDERED TOWARDS THEM.
DONNERWETTER! WAS IST?
THE SCHWEINHUND ARE MAD!


THEN, AT A PREARRANGED SIGNAL FROM THEIR LEADER, EVERY VOLUNTEER BALED OUT, LEAVING HIS DRIVERLESS VEHICLE TO SPEED ON TOWARDS THE ENEMY.
JUMP FOR IT, MEN!


WITH A MIGHTY CLASH OF METAL AND THE BLAST OF EXPLODING MINES, THE FIRST OF THE RUNAWAYS COLLIDED WITH THEIR TARGETS.

IT WORKED, SIR! YOU NEARLY WIPED THEM ALL OUT!
IF WE DON'T GET THE BLAZES OUT OF HERE FAST, THEIR SURVIVORS WILL WIPE *US* OUT! STEP ON IT, LADS!

THE DRIVERS NEEDED NO URGING.
FOOT'S NEARLY THROUGH THE FLOORBOARD ALREADY, CORP. IF YOU'RE IN SUCH A HURRY, 'OP OUT AND GIVE A PUSH!
BANG YOUR FOOT DOWN, DRIVER!

TWO ENEMY ARMOURED CARS GAVE CHASE AND RAPIDLY CLOSED THE DISTANCE. THEN A CHANCE SHOT HIT ONE OF THE GERMAN DRIVERS AND THE VEHICLE SWERVED AND SMASHED INTO THE OTHER.

COR! I GOT THE PERISHER!

YOU COULDN'T 'IT THE PYRAMIDS AT THREE YARDS RANGE. IT WAS MY SHOT!

BUT THE LOSS OF THE CONVOY AND ITS VITAL SUPPLIES WAS A MILITARY CATASTROPHE.

THE CONVOY IS BELIEVED WIPED OUT, SIR— AND THE SUPPLY POSITION IS DESPERATE!

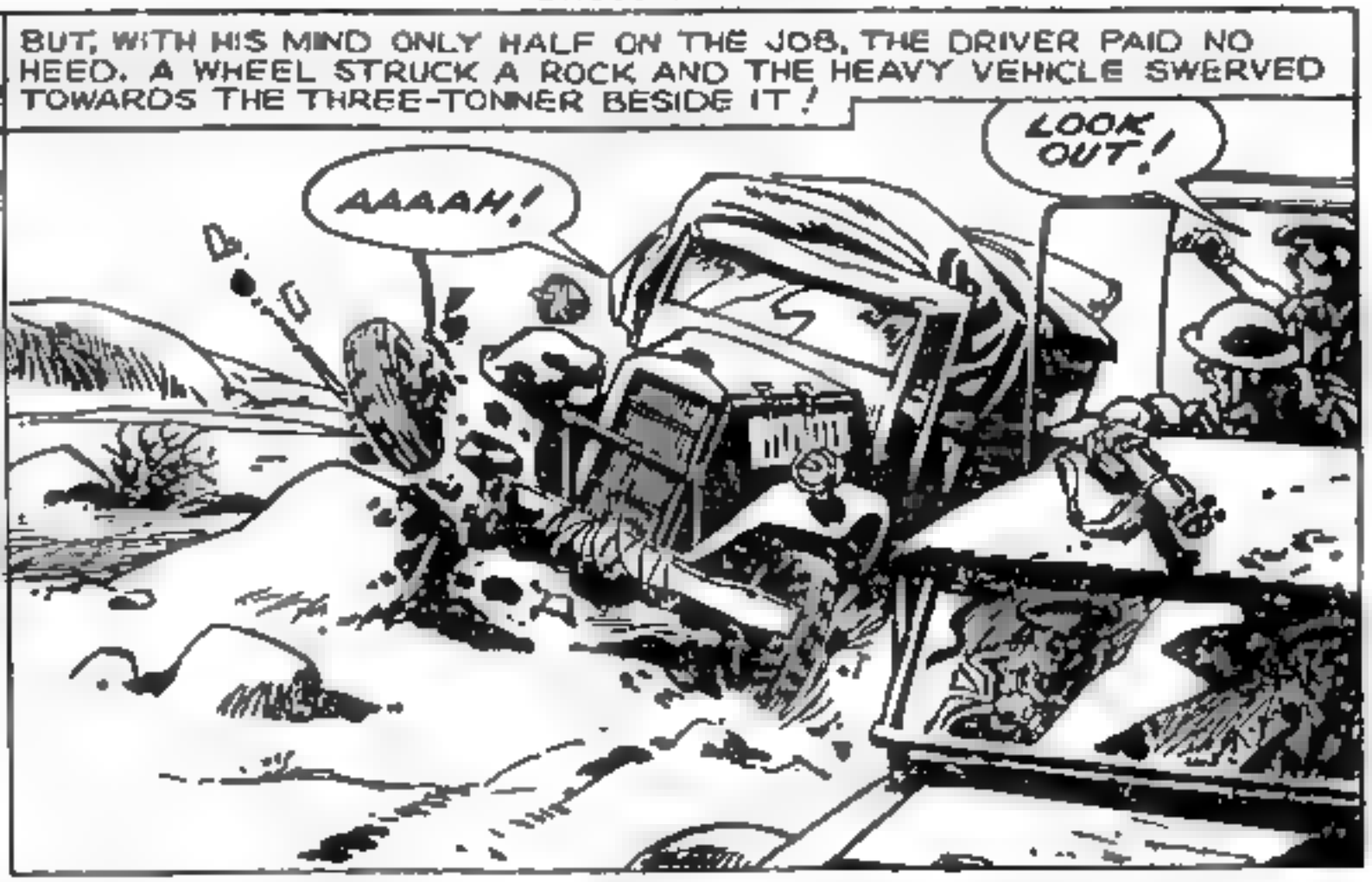
THIS IS DISASTROUS! WE MUST SEND OUR RESERVE TRANSPORT AT ONCE — AND ESCORT IT WITH EVERY TANK WE'VE GOT AT BASE!

HARDCASTLE WAS BEING PUSHED INTO A RASH DECISION.

DO YOU THINK IT WISE TO LEAVE BASE UNDEFENDED, STEVE?

WHO DO YOU THINK IS GOING TO ATTACK IT— DICK GRANTLEY'S GHOST PANZERS? I'M GOING TO SEE FOR MYSELF THAT THIS CONVOY GETS THROUGH.

MEANWHILE, IN THE SHIMMERING HEAT OF THE DESERT, THREE CROWDED TRUCKS RACED TOWARDS THEIR DISTANT BASE.
WE WERE LUCKY TO COME OUT OF THAT LOT, SIR!
THE SOONER WE GET BACK TO EL SHIRREF THE BETTER. ANOTHER SUPPLY COLUMN WILL HAVE TO BE ORGANISED -- AND FAST!
THE TWO YOUNG DRIVERS WHO HAD BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DISASTER WERE REALLY WORRIED.
WHAT DO YOU RECKON THE MAJOR WILL DO TO US WHEN WE GET BACK, MATE? THE SERGEANT SAID WE WERE GOING ON A CHARGE.
WE'LL BE GOING ON A STRETCHER IF YOU DON'T WATCH IT, SNOWY! IF YOU HIT ONE OF THEM ROCKS YOU'LL HAVE US OVER!


BUT, WITH HIS MIND ONLY HALF ON THE JOB, THE DRIVER PAID NO HEED. A WHEEL STRUCK A ROCK AND THE HEAVY VEHICLE SWERVED TOWARDS THE THREE-TONNER BESIDE IT!
AAAAH!
LOOK OUT!

NEXT MOMENT...

TEN MINUTES LATER, GROSSLY OVERCROWDED, THE REMAINING LORRY RESUMED THE JOURNEY.
KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN! THAT OTHER PANZER FORCE IS HOLED UP IN ONE OF THOSE WADIS AHEAD OF US.
THERE'S SOMETHING OVER TO THE NORTH-EAST, SIR.
IF THE APPROACHING VEHICLES WERE PANZERS, THERE WAS NO ESCAPE FOR GRANTLEY AND HIS MEN.
LOOKS LIKE A SUPPLY TRAIN WITH AN ARMOURED ESCORT, SIR.
THE RESERVE TANKS FROM BASE! THE BRIGADIER HAS LEFT EL SHIRREF WIDE OPEN TO ATTACK!
THE GERMANS WERE ALSO WATCHING THE BRITISH ARMOUR WHICH CLEARLY SEEMED UNAWARE OF THEIR EXISTENCE!
ACH! THAT NEW BRITISH COMMANDER IS A DUMMKOPF! AS SOON AS THOSE TANKS ARE SAFELY OUT OF RANGE WE WILL ATTACK HIS BASE. WARN ALL CREWS TO STAND BY!
JAWOHL, HERR OBERST!

THE UNDEFENDED BASE WAS AS GOOD AS DOOMED — UNLESS DICK GRANTLEY AND HIS HANDFUL OF MEN COULD DO SOMETHING!
DRIVER, SLOW DOWN A BIT. I WANT EVERYBODY TO BALE OUT AND GET UNDER COVER. I'LL TAKE THE WHEEL.
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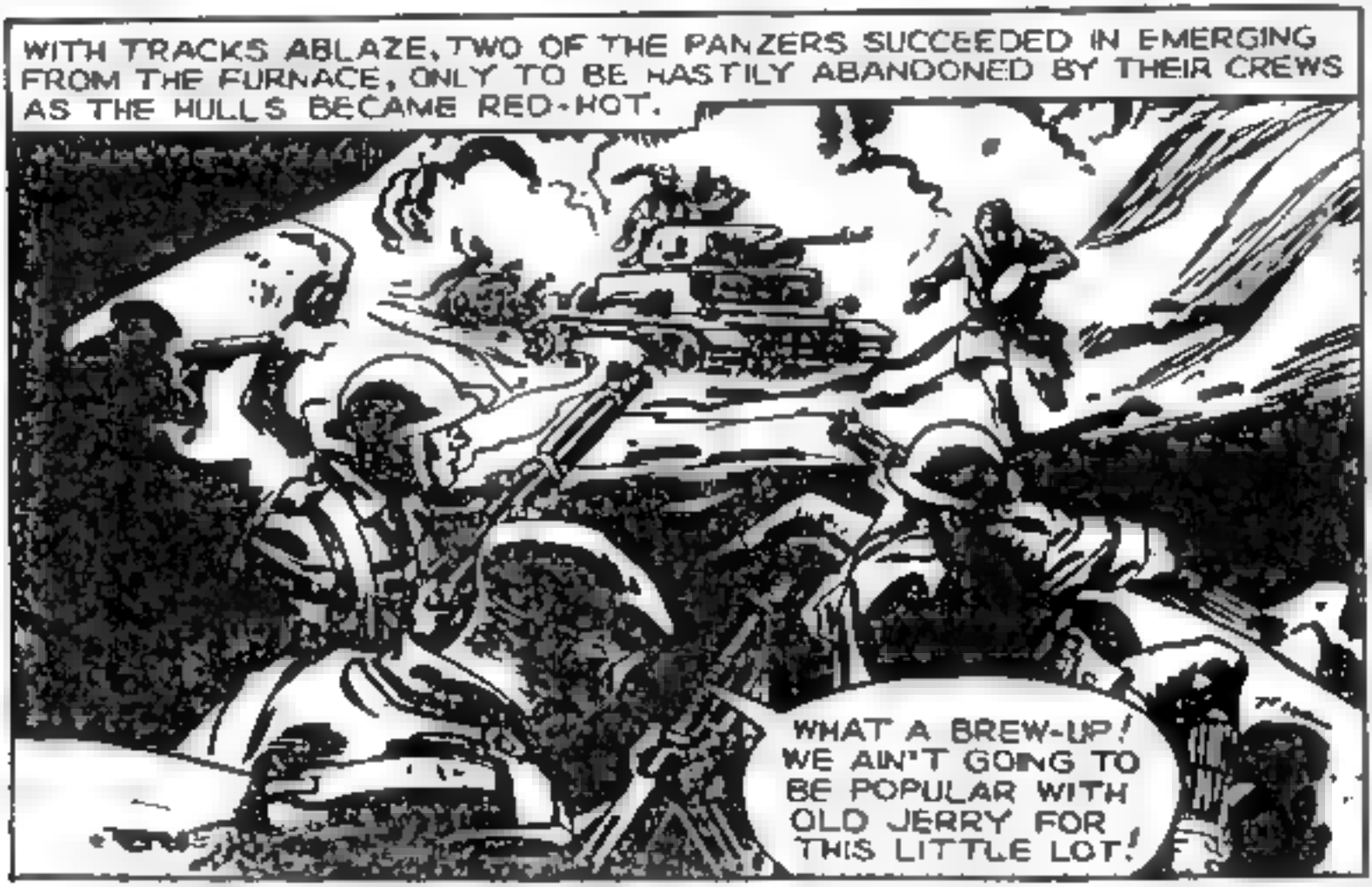
THE GERMANS HAD IGNORED THE SOLITARY THREE-TONNER CLOSER TO THEM UNTIL TOO LATE.
HIMMEL! WHAT IS THE FOOL DOING? SHOOT HIM, QUICK. BEFORE HE GIVES AWAY OUR HIDING-PLACE TO THOSE ACCURSED TANKS!

IGNORING THE SCATTERED VOLLEY OF SMALL ARMS FIRE WHICH GREETED HIM, GRANTLEY SENT THE TRUCK CAREERING INTO THE WADI TOWARDS A PETROL TANKER.
THAT SHOULD START SOMETHING. WITH ANY LUCK IT MIGHT EVEN BLOCK THE WADI!

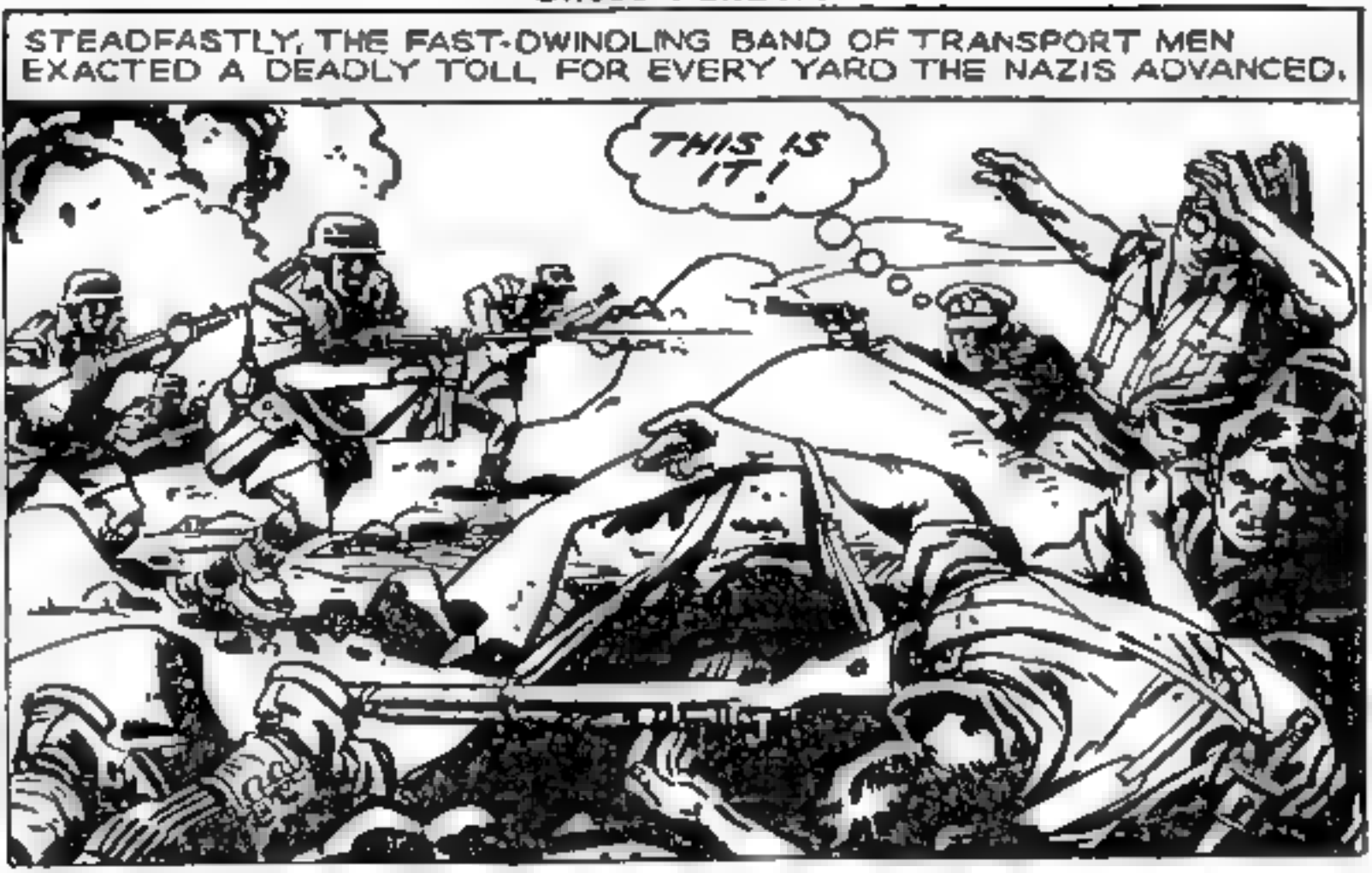
THE TWO VEHICLES COLLIDED AND AS THE HIGH OCTANE FUEL GUSHED FROM THE RIVEN SIDES OF THE TANKER, GRANTLEY RAISED A VEREY PISTOL AND FIRED.
ACHTUNG! ACHTUNG! GET THE PANZERS OUT! RAUS!

THE ESCAPING FUEL IGNITED WITH A THUNDEROUS ROAR, HURLING BLAZING SPIRIT ON TO OTHER CAMOUFLAGED VEHICLES WITHIN THE WADI. IN SECONDS, THE SCENE WAS AN INFERNO.
DONNERWETTER! WE ARE DEAD MEN!
ACH!


WITH TRACKS ABLAZE, TWO OF THE PANZERS SUCCEEDED IN EMERGING FROM THE FURNACE, ONLY TO BE HASTILY ABANDONED BY THEIR CREWS AS THE HULLS BECAME RED-HOT.
WHAT A BREW-UP! WE AIN'T GOING TO BE POPULAR WITH OLD JERRY FOR THIS LITTLE LOT!

TWO MILES AWAY, ALL EYES HAD TURNED TOWARDS THE WADI WHICH HAD SO DRAMATICALLY ERUPTED IN FLAME AND EXPLOSION.
WHAT THE DEVIL'S GOING ON OVER THERE?
SHALL I TAKE A SECTION OF TANKS OVER THERE AND INVESTIGATE, STEVE? IT COULD BE THAT DICK GRANTLEY WAS RIGHT ABOUT THOSE PANZERS, AFTER ALL!

MEANWHILE, FOR GRANTLEY AND HIS MEN, THE POSITION WAS GRIM. LIKE ANGRY WASPS, SMOKED OUT FROM THEIR NESTS, THE GERMANS WERE CLOSING IN VENGEFULLY
THEY'RE GOING TO MAKE US PAY FOR THIS, SIR. WE'RE IN DEAD TROUBLE NOW!
I'M AFRAID YOU'RE RIGHT, SANDERS. SORRY I LET YOU IN FOR THIS!


STEADFASTLY, THE FAST-DWINDLING BAND OF TRANSPORT MEN EXACTED A DEADLY TOLL FOR EVERY YARD THE NAZIS ADVANCED.
THIS IS IT!

AT THAT CRUCIAL MOMENT, A LINE OF TANKS APPEARED THROUGH THE SWIRLING SMOKE, THEIR MACHINE GUNS LASHING THE MEN OF THE AFRIKA KORPS.
STONE THE CROWS WE'RE SAVED, MATES!
WE SURRENDER, ENGLANDERS. WE SURRENDER!

FROM THE LEADING TANK, STEPHEN HARDCASTLE GAZED IN STARK AMAZEMENT AT THE MASS OF BLAZING WRECKAGE JAMMED IN THE WADI.
BY THE STARS, THEY WERE THERE, AFTER ALL! THAT LOT COULD HAVE TAKEN EL SHIRREF AND THE EIGHTH ARMY WOULD HAVE HAD TO RETREAT! THE C-IN-C WOULD HAVE BROKEN ME FOR THAT!

DICK GRANTLEY SAW THAT VICTORY HAD NOT BEEN WITHOUT ITS GRIM PRICE.
POOR OLD SANDERS, TOO! HE DIDN'T WANT TO FIGHT, BUT WHEN IT CAME TO IT, HE WAS AS GAME AS THE REST! HE'D BE ALIVE NOW--THEY ALL WOULD--IF STEVE HARDCASTLE HAD LISTENED TO ME.
LOWER YOUR VOICE, DICK-- HE'S JUST BEHIND US.

HARDCASTLE HAD NOT HEARD WHAT HAD BEEN SAID AND HIS MANNER WAS PATRONISING!
WELL, DICK, YOU GOT YOURSELF INTO A NICE FIX! LUCKY WE TURNED UP WHEN WE DID IN TIME TO SAVE YOU!
YOU WEREN'T IN TIME TO SAVE ALL OF US! YOU THREW AWAY THAT CHANCE TWO DAYS AGO. THAT SHOULD LOOK GOOD IN DESPATCHES!

THE SMILE DISAPPEARED FROM STEVE HARDCASTLE'S FACE. PALE WITH FURY, THE TWO OFFICERS GLARED AT EACH OTHER.
EASY, CHAPS! KEEP IT TILL LATER, OR IT'LL BE ALL OVER BASE TOMORROW.
VERY WELL! BUT THIS ISN'T THE END OF THE MATTER. I SHAN'T FORGET THIS, GRANTLEY!
NOR SHALL I--SIR!

HARDCASTLE TURNED AWAY ABRUPTLY. GRANTLEY'S WORDS HAD STRUCK HOME. IF THERE SHOULD BE AN ENQUIRY, HE MIGHT NOT COME OUT OF IT TOO WELL.
YOU'VE GOT HIM WORRIED, DICK, BUT WATCH OUT! HE'S AS SLIPPERY AS AN EEL, YOU KNOW THAT!
I DO, BUT NOW I'M BEGINNING TO THINK I'VE KEPT MY MOUTH SHUT FOR TOO LONG!

BUT THE BRIGADIER'S CUNNING MIND WAS ALREADY SEEKING A WAY IN WHICH HE COULD USE THE SITUATION TO HIS FULL ADVANTAGE.
YOU, THERE! WHERE IS YOUR COMMANDER AND WHAT IS HIS RANK?
HE IS OVER THERE. HE IS A PANZER GENERAL.

STRIDING OVER TO THE WOUNDED GERMAN, HARDCASTLE CAME STRAIGHT TO THE POINT.
HERR GENERAL, YOU ARE MY PRISONER! YOU WILL BROADCAST A MESSAGE TO YOUR FLYING COLUMNS NOW OPERATING BEHIND OUR LINES, ORDERING THEM TO FALL BACK OR SURRENDER ...

THE GERMAN ROSE SLOWLY AND PAINFULLY TO HIS FEET.
I AM A GERMAN OFFICER. I DO NOT BETRAY MY COUNTRY!

HARDCASTLE'S REACTION BETRAYED THE MAN THAT HE REALLY WAS...
YOU FILTHY NAZI SWINE! FOR THAT YOU WILL MARCH AHEAD OF MY TANK ALL THE WAY BACK TO BASE. A FEW MILES OF THAT MAY CHANGE YOUR MIND.
SIR! YOU CAN'T DO THAT--THE CHAP'S WOUNDED!

BUT HARDCASTLE WAS NOW DEAF TO REASON.
WHEN I WANT YOUR ADVICE I'LL ASK FOR IT. GO ON, YOU SQUAREHEAD PIG--MARCH!

AS THE NAZI LIMPED FORWARD, ONE OF THE GERMAN PRISONERS CALLED OUT A WARNING IN GERMAN...
ACHTUNG, HERR GENERAL! DER MINEN!

ONLY DICK GRANTLEY UNDERSTOOD THAT WARNING. WITH A SHOUT, HE LEAPED FORWARD.
STEVE -- LOOK OUT! COME BACK, YOU FOOL!
WHAT THE DEVIL? TAKE YOUR HANDS OFF ME, GRANTLEY -- I'LL DEAL WITH YOU LATER!

BUT GRANTLEY HELD ON UNTIL A VICIOUS BACK-HANDER FROM THE BARREL OF HARDCASTLE'S REVOLVER SENT HIM REELING BACK:
STAND BACK, I SAID! WHITEWAY, PUT THE FOOL UNDER CLOSE ARREST!
NOW YOU'VE DONE IT, DICK. LITTLE TIN-GODS LIKE HARDCASTLE DON'T LIKE BEING MANHANDLED!

WIPING THE BLOOD AWAY FROM HIS MOUTH, GRANTLEY WAS ABOUT TO SHOUT ONCE MORE WHEN THE ROAR OF A SUDDEN EXPLOSION DROWNED ANY SOUND HE MIGHT HAVE UTTERED.
GOOD GRIEF! A LANDMINE!
THE WHOLE AREA IS MINED. THE JERRY TRIED TO WARN HIS GENERAL BUT HE TOOK NO NOTICE AND DELIBERATELY LED STEVE ON. I TRIED TO STOP HIM --YOU SAW WHAT HAPPENED.

HEEDLESS OF THE FACT THAT OTHER MINES LAY HIDDEN IN THE SAND AROUND THEM, THE PAIR DRAGGED THE DYING BRIGADIER FROM THE DANGER ZONE.
YES, I SAW IT DICK. IT WAS NO FAULT OF YOURS. YOU DID MORE THAN MOST MEN WOULD HAVE DONE. IT WAS ENTIRELY STEVE'S FAULT THAT THIS HAPPENED.

HARDCASTLE NEVER RECOVERED CONSCIOUSNESS. HIS INSATIABLE AMBITION WOULD DRIVE HIM NO MORE.
WELL, THIS LEAVES ME IN TEMPORARY COMMAND. SO I'D BETTER GET CRACKING AND TIDY THINGS UP. THERE'S A LOT TO DO. WILL YOU LEND ME A HAND AS MY CHIEF OF STAFF, DICK?

THERE'LL BE PROMOTION IN IT FOR YOU, DICK, PROMOTION YOU SHOULD HAVE HAD LONG AGO. YOU'VE EARNED A REWARD!
THANKS, PAUL. BUT FIRST, IF I'VE EARNED A REWARD, HERE'S WHAT I'D LIKE YOU TO DO FOR ME -- GET DOWN OFF THAT TANK AND LET ME CLEAN UP THOSE JERRY FLYING COLUMNS FOR YOU.

IT'S ALL YOURS, DICK! WHEN WE'VE SORTED OURSELVES OUT I'LL SEE YOU GET AN ARMOURED REGIMENT ALL TO YOURSELF. NOW GET WEAVING, YOU OLD FIRE-EATER!

DICK GRANTLEY WAS AT LAST DOING THE JOB FOR WHICH HE HAD BEEN TRAINED. AS WHITEWAY WATCHED HIM GO, HE KNEW THAT HE HAD MADE THE RIGHT DECISION.

REMIND ME TO HAVE DICK GRANTLEY OFFICIALLY RETURNED TO SQUADRON DUTY. HE'S WASTED AS A TRANSPORT OFFICER.

WELL, HARDLY WASTED, SIR -- BUT HE'LL DO A LITTLE MORE DAMAGE WITH A TANK THAN A THREE-TONNER!

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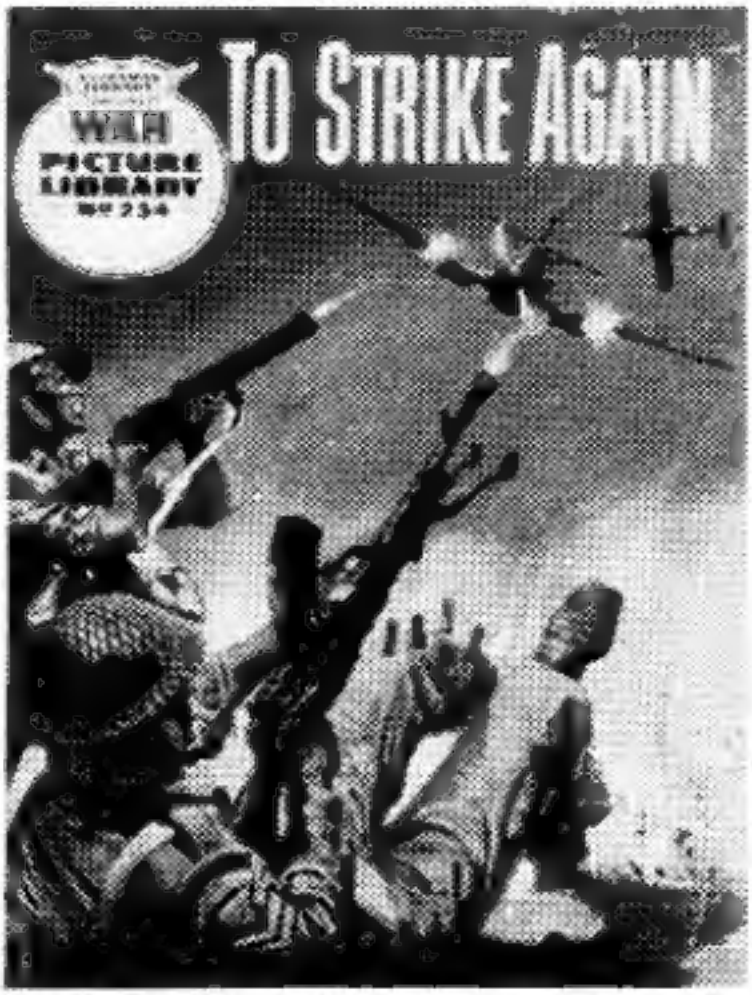

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